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ABSTRACT

The university in Latin America has always been a dynamic and changing institution. One of the university's roles is to produce free and universal individuals, who are capable of thinking, deciding, and acting on their own, and are possessors of an inner freedom that liberates them of all types of prejudice. In its role as intellectual emancipator, the university strengthens its position as a space of liberty, pluralism, humanism and universalism, research, creation, and social communication of the elements of culture. As part of an educational system, the university must recognize the demands of the society and the State. The university is also a crucial cog in the wheel of economic growth and welfare, modernization, industrialization, technological and scientific achievement, and social development. It is also a principal generator of national intelligence about the country's natural resources and the possibilities and constraints for their use. The university is compelled to fulfill difficult political chores, and suffers the negative consequences of an exaggerated ideologization and politization of its problems. It must guarantee the positive aspects of a university for the elite within the framework of a university for the masses, and it combines the challenge of achieving the highest possible academic standards with diminishing budgets. (JDD)

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## The mission of the university in cultural development and education : diversity within the university

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# THE ROLE AND MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY IN CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION: DIVERSITY WITHIN UNIVERSALITY

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International Association of Universities
Ninth General Conference
Helsinki, Finlandia,
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# THE ROLE AND MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY IN CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION: DIVERSITY WITHIN UNIVERSALITY

by José Sarukhán
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Some of the historical and traditional traits and primary functions among a university's attributions are a crucial role in the development of culture and education, and more specifically, an emphasis on diversity as a measure of universality.

The university in Latin America, brought over from Western Europe, belongs to and is a product of the **Modern Age.** In this process, the university has never been just a reflection, product or instrument of social structures or interest groups, nor has it been circumscribed to a single task or function. The university has always been a dynamic and changing institution, redefining its nature, its

objectives, its functions, its specificity and universality, its always contradictory pluralism of possibilities and outcomes, its autonomy and its academic freedom.

Through this whole process, the university and the academia have elaborated a specific **concept of higher education**. It is identified with the achievement of liberty and equality, and the rational capabilities of every citizen and individual; the right to a good standard of living, and a privilege for all. All higher education must train individuals with an open mind in search of truth, with a critical and analytical attitude, rational arguments and a thirst for knowledge. This amounts to, and demands, a questioning of one's life, awareness of one's own ignorance, the development of our capability of study, and the assimilation and creation of scientific, political, social, and moral concepts. The quest for true knowledge is compatible and interdependent with a concern over higher spheres of moral, social and political life. The university must educate citizens to govern their lives in the most reflexive and ethical way, and to learn how to apply the best theories and solutions (moral, social, political, and economic) available.

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Faculty and students must assume and stimulate rational and analytical capabilities in confronting intellectual, moral, political, theoretical, and practical debates, above all, when these bring into the fore traditionalism and authoritarianism of institutions, individuals or textbooks, or harbour attitudes of passivity and conformity. Education based on narrow specialization must also be opposed in favour of the ability to live and act in different dimensions and phases of life.

The university must produce **free and universal** individuals, capable of thinking, deciding, and acting on their own, able to be objectively critical and self-critical, of self-control and leadership over others; possessor of an inner freedom which is reflected in its social and political inclinations; a freedom that liberates them of all types of prejudice.

The process generated by modernism and the prototype of university that arose from it, inherited by Latin America and made part of its societies and cultures, developed its own history and characteristics, its achievements and failures. During the last decades, the university has experimented, in a particular fashion, a process of expansion and diversification, of crisis and progress, related to the

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transformations of the societies to which they belong and to the impact of great international changes. This has brought about a rising tide of demands, responsibilities, and tasks, in a context of transition for the process of a higher education caring mostly for needs of elites to a phase characterized by a process of massification and growing financial restrictions and the siege of conflicts and tensions of varied nature. The university has grown and projected itself unto Latin American society, culture, the economy, politics, and the state. It has assembled different functions and powers.

In the first place, the university is identified with education as an ideal, a power that makes a nation free. And it does so as a venue of reason and the search of the truth by a **cultural community** of faculty and students. In its role as **intellectual** (and moral) **emancipator**, the university strengthens its position as a space of liberty, pluralism, humanism and universalism, research, creation, and social communication of the elements of culture. The university puts in dispute and rejects all that is authoritarian, dogmatic, sacralized, repressive, conformist, alienating or mystifying.

Secondly, the university, part of an **educational system**, must recognize the demands of the society and the State in order to assume its functions and objectives. It is part of the process of **reproduction and social change**. It operates as a mechanism of **selection and distribution** of students and faculty and of the outlines and contents of their activities. It controls and "indexes" knowledge, its production, its components, its distribution and use. It has a crucial role in the production and reproduction of **social and cognitive hierarchies**.

This selective and distributive role is defined by the **democratic ideal** which has an impact on college and university education to which -with the limits that each social system imposes- all individuals should, in principle, have access to as part of their rights, in order to achieve a fuller integration between individual and society.

Thirdly, the university is a crucial cog in the wheel of **economic growth and welfare**, of **modernization**, industrialization, technological and scientific achievement, of **social development**. It must contribute to satisfy demands of excellence, of specialization, of growth in its scientific and technological components, in teaching and learning, in research, in innovation, and in culture. It must make attainable and

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also promote, a progress towards a **scientific society**, with growing capabilities of investment, production, productivity, and thus, of required standards of personality, behaviour, labour, and daily life.

Finally, it plays, at least in the case of my University, the very crucial role of principal generator of the intelligence that a nation must have not only about the characteristics of its own territory and its natural resources, the possibilities and constraints for their use, but also about the nature, peculiarities and aspirations of its society. This is so because many different institutions that should be responsible of those functions, both within and outside the government do not exist or are unable to perform those tasks for society. The awareness of such issues and problems in the universities, in many cases since long ago, makes them very responsive to take care of such functions themselves, often with heavy economic burdens and social responsibilities. Seen in these roles, the University becomes very much the brain, and also the heart, of society.

The university must contribute to generate a higher level of rationality among the general public and endow it with the necessary instruments in order to create a social and cultural environment that

expands and intensifies cultural, scientific, and technical creativity, and brings a wider scope of players and structures into play with the patterns of modern civilization.

These problems become of particular importance in the context created by the crisis of the traditional model of development of the Latin American countries -by the stagnation of growth and modernization, the concentration of power in a reduced number of world regions, the new division of world labour, and the threats and possibilities opened by the Third Industrial and Scientific-Technological Revolution.

Finally, the university is compelled - whether consciously and voluntarily or not- to fulfil **difficult political chores**. Some are derived from its own ideal of research and criticism, of formulation and proposition. At the same time, the university rewards aspirations for economic, social, and political improvement of its faculty and students, of individuals and groups. However, it also fulfills aspirations for information, intelligence, of rational and critical capacity **vis-a-vis** the political system and the social establishment. The university also tends to become an object and a ground for social and political competition,

arena and bounty for elites and groups of interest. Thus, it suffers the negative consequences of an exaggerated **ideologization** and **politization** of its problems. This happens often because universities used to be, or in some cases still are, the only social spaces open and free to the expression of critical points of view about the situation of a country It unavoidably becomes a training ground for politics. Besides, it finds itself in the role of explaining the politization of a society and its components, pronouncing causes, effects, and options.

It is this public university of Latin America that is required to do many different things at the same time. It must guarantee the positive aspects of a university for elites within the framework of a mass university, combining the challenge of achieving the highest possible academic standards with the handicap of dramatically diminishing budgets. All of the above results in an imperative for growing conditions of training, quality, and excellence. All of this is part of the crisis and dangers that surround it, but also of the opportunities and rewards that, not withstanding, are in reach of its potential, of its realities, possibilities and achievements.